

Kosmas Calls for Investigation into Reports of Cities “Blacklisted” for Federal Conferences

Sends Bipartisan Letter to Head of Government Accountability Office Urging Action

July 23, 2009

(Washington, DC) — Today, Congresswoman Suzanne Kosmas (FL-24) led her colleagues in sending a bipartisan letter to Gene Dodaro, Acting Comptroller General of the United States and head of the Government Accountability Office, urging an investigation into reports that federal agencies are avoiding, or “blacklisting,” certain U.S. cities for conferences due to those cities’ reputation as too leisurely or resort-oriented.

A June Orlando Sentinel article reported that “leisure destinations have been labeled as inappropriate for government meetings and other gatherings, regardless of price,” (Orlando Sentinel, 6/16/09). This week, the Wall Street Journal reported that the Departments of Agriculture and Justice are avoiding certain cities, citing an email by an FBI employee that stated “Las Vegas and Orland[o] are the first 2 on the chopping block,” (Wall Street Journal, 7/22/09).

“We need to make sure taxpayer dollars are protected, and eliminating destinations for federal conferences based on anything other than cost effectiveness is a recipe for waste,” said Congresswoman Kosmas. “The Orlando region has been hit hard by the recession, and government conferences and events are important to our economy. Orlando’s high-value accommodations should be given the same opportunity to host conferences as any other city.”

“I urge the GAO to quickly investigate which agencies are “blacklisting” cities so we can end this practice as soon as possible,” added Kosmas.

“We applaud Congresswoman Kosmas for leading the request for an investigation into this matter,” said Roger Dow, president and CEO of the U.S. Travel Association. “It is irresponsible and a waste of taxpayer dollars for government agencies to base travel decisions on fear of criticism from the media about a specific destination. More than seven million Americans depend on travel for their paychecks, and we expect the government to book business travel by choosing the best value, not the best way to save face.”

Kosmas was joined on her letter by Florida representatives Corrine Brown (D-FL-3), John Mica (R-FL-7), Alan Grayson (D-FL-8), and Lincoln Diaz-Balart (R-FL-21), as well as Nevada representatives Dina Titus (D-NV-3), Shelley Berkley (D-NV-1), and Dean Heller (R-NV-2),

The full text of the letter to the GAO can be found below:

Dear Comptroller General Dodaro:

Recently, it was reported that several federal departments have issued a directive banning government meetings and conferences in specific U.S. cities out of concern that these destinations are viewed by the public as too leisurely or resort-oriented. If true, these serious allegations call into question federal agency decision making concerning travel and locations of off-site meetings and conferences. Such "blacklisting" of specific destinations could result in a waste of taxpayer dollars and is counterproductive to ongoing efforts to strengthen the American economy.

We write to you to request that the Government Accountability Office (GAO) undertake a review of the policies and practices that federal agencies, including the Department of Justice and the General Services Administration, use to determine city locations for convening meetings, seminars and conferences within the United States.

Specifically, we request that GAO's investigation, at a minimum, include the following:

- A review and evaluation of the criteria each federal agency uses to determine in which U.S. city to convene a national, regional or local meeting, seminar or conference;
- Information regarding written or unwritten orders that direct agency personnel to avoid convening or attending a national, regional or local meeting, seminar or conference in a specific U.S. destination;
- Information regarding any list of cities that are purposely being avoided as destinations to host national, regional or local meetings, seminars and conferences;
- An analysis of the request for proposals issued and proposals accepted by each agency in order to determine if any U.S. city is being purposely excluded from hosting a national, regional or local meeting, seminar or conference.

Government travel for meetings, conferences and seminars is an important source of economic activity for many communities throughout the United States, and every destination should have an equal and fair opportunity to host federal meetings and events. The federal government should make meeting location decisions based on factors such as overall cost, appropriate meeting facility space, and the quality of services provided in a particular city, convention facility or hotel. We respectfully request that you investigate this matter and provide the result of your review to us no later than February 1, 2010.

Thank you for your attention to this request.

Sincerely,

Suzanne Kosmas

Dina Titus

Corrine Brown

John Mica

Alan Grayson

Lincoln Diaz-Balart

Shelley Berkley

Dean Heller

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